[Shi 'hou]

sheikh's name and address in Arabic, and a statement in the same language to the effect that the bearer had his permission to travel through Oman without let or hindrance. It also offered dire penalties, including the amputation of the right hand, to any who dared to show violence to the bearer. Unfolding this rather dirty piece of paper I handed it to the headman. He held it gingerly in his fingers, gazing at it suspiciously, and pretended to read it although it was upside down. With a shrug he then handed it to another tribesman, but this man could make nothing of the document either.

Although they could not understand Arabic script, I think they must have had some inkling of its meaning, for they began a violent altercation amongst themselves. One of them suddenly pointed in the direction of Ras-al-Khaimah, and then at us. Beginning to get rather tired of all this pantomime, I decided to take decisive measures. There is a rule in the desert, at least among the Bedouins, that if you are attacked you should seize the garment of the most respectable Arab and cry: '*Daheel*', which means 'protection'. Under the unwritten laws of Arab hospitality, he is obliged to keep you in safe custody for at least twenty-four hours. The principle is not unlike that obtaining in the Middle Ages, when the outlaw could enter a church and claim sanctuary from the clergy.

I had no idea how it would work with the *Shi'hou*, but I was determined to try. Dashing forward I seized the scanty hem of the headman's *kufiyeh* and yelled '*Daheel*' at the top of my voice. To my surprise the old man's face was suddenly contorted with fear, and he stepped back as though I had struck him a blow. His rapid action resulted in a piece of the rotten cloth coming away in my hands and he was left almost naked. The effect of his predicament on the other *Shi'hou* was astonishing. At first amazement, then amusement, was written on their faces. Some grinned widely, others burst into shrieks of laughter. Even the headman, who had covered up his bare limbs as best he could with a few shreds of cloth, was grinning sheepishly. All signs of hostility had vanished. With a gesture the headman beckoned us towards the hut from which the shrieking woman had emerged.

Closely followed by a still laughing bodyguard, we marched towards the hut. The headman entered first, directing us to follow him. It was dark and dirty inside as well as hot and foul-smelling. Our hosts squatted on the bare floor in a circle, which we joined.